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ABSTRACT

The paper reports on the Third International Conference of The European Association for Special Education held in Helsinki, Finland in 1980 to promote educational services for handicapped children and youth. Representatives from 29 countries in Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America attended. The theme of the conference was "Communication and Handicap" and almost 50 papers dealt with language and communications problems. Other papers addressed psychiatric disorders, mental retardation, sensory and motor disturbances, immigration and ethnic minorities, integration, vocational education, methods of instruction, and teacher training. Several presentations addressed the Bergen project, a cooperative international longitudinal study of learning disabled children in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Also presented was a report of a statistical study of variables dealing with social adjustment conducted by J. Personen from the University of Jyvaskyla in Finland. An information section at the conference offered reports, brochures, and posters about the education of immigrant children in Sweden. Other events included participation of several high international dignitaries, two sessions of the General Assembly in which member nations reported on the states of special education in their countries, and a special workshop on the exchange of information in special education. (SW)

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Report on the 1980 Conference of the European Association for Special Education in Helsinki

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Report on the 1980 Conference of the European Association for Special Education in Helsinki

During four days in early August, 1980, the European Association for Special Education convened an international congress in Helsinki, Finland. EASE is the European equivalent of the Council for Exceptional Children. Since its inception, it has been very interested not only in European but global cooperation in the promotion of educational services for handicapped children and youth. For this reason, people from all parts of the world were invited to participate in the proceedings. The following is a partial account of this exciting and many-faceted event.

The History of EASE

A brief history of EASE might help to create a perspective for those who are not acquainted with the organization. EASE came into being in 1968 at a meeting in Sweden, where representatives from a dozen Western European countries convened to form an international association. Two years later, at a meeting in Switzerland, a constitution was ratified and the first officers elected.

The members of EASE are non-governmental organizations serving handicapped children.

The exact present memberships could not be ascertained, but at the General Assembly in Helsinki there were representatives from 15 organizations in 11 countries. They in turn represented about 42,000 individual members. There are no members from Eastern Europe, but a close cooperative relationship exists with special educators from communist countries.

Administrative overhead in running the organization is modest. Over the last two years the income was about $5,000, and the expenses less than $4,000. However, these figures in no way reflect the substantial role EASE is playing in promoting international cooperation in special education.

Some of the objectives of the association are accomplished by means of small seminars focusing on a specific topic. Participants are often personally invited, and their papers are published in conference proceedings. One such meeting was held in Denmark in 1978. The theme was "Problems of Autism". The report of the seminar has recently been published in book form in English with the title Children with Psychotic Behavior.

A second medium of information exchange has been in the major conventions. The first one was held in Sweden in 1971 with 800 participants. A second world-wide conference took place in 1974 in Spain. It had 2,000 people present. The meeting in Helsinki was the third such event.

The Helsinki Conference

The Third International EASE Conference was organized by the Finnish Association for Special Education and the Finnish Ministry of Education. The planning was exceptionally well done. As an example, all who presented papers had to submit one-page abstracts beforehand. These were translated into Finnish and assembled into a book of abstracts in both English and Finnish and were available to the participants at their arrival. A booklet with the names, occupations, and addresses of all the participants was also prepared. The names were listed alphabetically according to country for easy information retrieval.

The setting for the conference was the International Congress Center DIPOLI in the city of Espoo on the shore of the Baltic Sea. The Center had an ultra-modern design and was superbly built for such meetings.

There were altogether 1,700 participants from 30 countries plus the United Nations.

The breakdown according to region was as follows:

Western Europe	14 countries
Eastern Europe	6 countries: Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Rumania, USSR, and Yugoslavia
Asia	5 countries: India, Israel, Lebanon, Philippines, Saudi-Arabia
Africa	2 countries: Uganda, Zambia
North-America	2 countries: Canada, the United States

There were about 135 paper presentations from 20 countries. Finland, as could be expected, led with 56 papers. The United States was second with 15. Then came Norway with 13 and the United Kingdom with 10.

Topics Covered

The theme of the conference was "Communication and Handicap", but the actual presentations clustered around several diverse topics. Almost fifty papers dealt in some way with language and communications problems, aobut 20 concerned with psychiatric disorders, and 15 with mental retardation. Other program themes included sensory and motor disturbances, immigration and ethnic minorities, integration, vocational education, methods of instruction, teacher training, and many more. A few selected samples will be briefly described.

One of the most interesting investigations currently being conducted in Europe is the so-called Bergen Project. It deserves attention because it is perhaps the most comprehensive cooperative international

study in special education ever conducted. Four Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden are working together on a longitudual study of learning disabilities of dyslexia in children. The aim is to develop better understanding of the different dimensions of underachievement in children. The leader of the project is Hans Jorgen Gjessing from the University of Bergen. He is a leading European authority in this field.

At the Helsinki conference there were several reports from the project. Gjessing and his staff gave progress reports from the Norwegian component of the investigation. Ten percent of the children in the participating school systems have persistent learning problems. They are roughly grouped into five categories. The first three, auditory, visual, and auditory-visual dyslexia are modality related. In the fourth group, emotional factors are at the root of the program. The fifth category is called pedagogical or educational dyslexia. This is caused by inadequate instruction. Gjessing maintains that each child is unique and that the poor results shown in efficacy studies can be traced to lack of refinement in assessment and remediation. One of the preliminary findings in the Norwegian investigation was the strong relationship between self-concept and learning disabilities in some children.

A problem investigated in the Swedish part of the Bergen Project was the relationship between linguistic awareness and dyslexia. A sub-group of dyslexic children was found who had problems in sound blending, sound analysis, identification of sound deletions, and word position analysis.

Behavior disorders and adjustment problems were the topic of many papers. Of special interest was a statistical study of variables dealing

with social adjustment, conducted by Jaakko Pesonen from the University of Jyväskylä in Finland. He traced the frequency curves since 1960 of juvenile criminal offenders, abortions, drug crimes, alcohol consumptions, venereal diseases, and similar factors. All showed a gradual increase between 1960 and 1968, a rapid acceleration during the period 1968-1976, and then a slow decline. The author explained these changes on the basis of a theory of an international value epidemic. The turbulent events that took place in many parts of the world in the late sixties and early seventies, particularly in the form of protest movements, reached and affected Finnish youth through the mass media. These movements, including the Chinese cultural revolution, the fight against the industrialized world in under-developed countries, the opposition to the Vietnamese War, the university riots, and the hippies all challenged old values and norms. When the issues on the international arena were solved or disappeared, symptoms of social maladjustment among Finnish youth declined.

One behavior deviation which has received considerable attention in the Nordic countries is the phenomenon of mobbing. Olweus' publication in 1973 of research showing that five percent of the children in public schools in Stockholm were the victims of scapegoating has led to a number of anti-mobbing projects. Monika Karlsson reported on such a program in Helsinki in which themes related to the opposition of group violence and the fostering of tolerance were incorporated in the regular subjects.

The education of children of "guest workers" and other immigrants is an enormous issue facing some European countries. The rapid industrialization in some countries during the last three decades has led

to an influx of millions of workers from less developed countries. Most of them were unskilled and uneducated, and they were brought in to fill the need for menial labor. The children of these worker suffer from many handicaps, including those of language and national and personal identity. According to one estimate, by the year 2000 one third of the young population in Europe will have immigrant backgrounds.

Considering the magnitude and present and future importance of this problem, very little was said about it at the conference. However, the Swedish National Board of Education had an information section with about a dozen different mimeographed reports, brochures, and posters about the education of immigrant children in that country. Sweden truly stands as a model for a national effort to meet the needs of immigrant children. According to the most recent statistics, 100,000 Swedish school children or 10 percent of the total have immigrant status. Home language instruction is provided for them in 50 different languages by 2,000 home language teachers. This large investment in special programs for immigrant children is based on the premise that a firm mastery of the parents' language and cultural heritage is essential for both language and identity development.

The problem of minorities and the preservation of cultural and ethnic diversity, which is currently attracting so much attention in the United States, has assumed great magnitude and complexity in some European countries. An interesting example is the Swedish minority situation in Finland. Out of the almost 5 million inhabitants in that country, about 300,000 or 6 percent use Swedish as their native language. Most of these live in areas where both languages are spoken. All Swedish

speaking children have to learn Finnish as a second language. There are, incidentally, no similarities between Finnish and Swedish. There are four major Swedish dialects, which are quite different from each other and from standard Swedish. In addition, some Swedes speak a hybrid language. Teachers, speech therapists and others who have to deal with dyslexia and other problems of delayed language development, face enormous difficulties in assessment and remediation.

Other Events

The participation of several high international dignitaries underlined the importance of the conference. At the closing sessions, the United Nation's executive secretary for the International Year for the Disabled Persons, Mrs. Nkanza, and the UNESCO director of special education, Mr. Sundberg delivered addresses. Other official events included a reception for the participants by the city of Espoo in its elegant city hall, a banquet, and a dance. At the banquet, Dr. Oluf Magne, President of EASE, gave a humor-filled tribute to the Finnish hosts and praised the Finns for their character of endurance that made them not only overcome great national calamities but also able to survive the invasion of special educators from across the world.

During the conference there were two sessions of the General Assembly. The representatives from the member nations reported on the states of special education in their countries and on some of the issues that were receiving attention. As examples, in Belgium efforts were increased to integrate children with physical and sensory handicaps in the public schools, and in Switzerland early childhood intervention was a top priority. In the United Kingdom, the progressive recommendations of the 1978 Warnock Report had not been implemented, and the present proposals being considered by the Parliament are of a much more modest nature.

Some of the EASE seminars that were scheduled for the coming year included a conference in West Germany on classroom techniques in special education, a seminar in Switzerland on the future of small insitutions, and two meetings in the Netherlands on the topics of the use of video techniques in special schools and on the preparation of the handicapped for adult life.

A special workshop on the exchange of information in special education was presided over by Mr. Rolf Kristiansen from Norway. Several concrete recommendations were made. One was to support the proposal made at the CEC World Congress in 1978 to establish an International Clearinghouse on Research, Information, and Materials. Another was to petition UNESCO to take the initiative in developing cooperation with pertinent international organizations, possibly in connection with a world-wide conference.

The EASE Program Committee graciously agreed to a last minute request from a representative of the Council for Exceptional Children to hold a round-table conference on how the Council of Exceptional Children can play a role in international cooperation. About 25 people from a dozen countries attended the meeting, including Dr. Magne and most of the members of the EASE executive board. Dr. John Bermingham from Ireland, the Chief Executive of Rehabilitation Internations, was also present. Some of the general issues covered included the dissemination of information and the problem of the translation of relevant literature, exchange programs, and research. Some of the discussion clustered around the target groups to be favored in the development of an information exchange program. There was also some debate about research priorities and ramifications.

Another feature of the convention was a program of visits to schools and agencies serving the handicapped. There was also an exhibition of commerical products related to special education. One section had for distribution many kinds of printed information about programs and services in different countries. Especially impressive were the many reports and surveys by the Swedish National Board of Education.

Conclusion

The conference was a clear indication of the growing strength of the European Association for Special Education. The representations from Eastern Europe and from other continents also reflect a global desire for closer cooperation in the service of the exceptional children and youth. It was particularly encouraging to find so many members of the CEC not only attending the conference but also presenting papers. The time may have come for special educators to work more closely together on a worldwide basis.